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F.B.I. Team Traces Unauthorized Disclosures

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 1 — The Federal Bureau of Investigation has formed a special team of agents to investigate disclosures of sensitive Government information to news organizations, and officials said the squad was at work on about a dozen cases.

The bureau said the four-man team was created earlier this year because of concern that such investigations needed to be better organized and assigned to highly experienced agents.

Bureau officials said the inquiries were being conducted under espionage statutes that prohibit unauthorized disclosures of classified information.

They said that while the specialized squad was new, bureau agents had long been involved in investigations of unau-

House and Senate negotiators left intact a provision that the C.I.A. finds too restrictive. Page A19.

thorized disclosures to the news media. The bureau declined to say, however, whether the number of cases under investigation was higher than usual.

The practice of providing sensitive information to reporters takes various forms in Washington. Legislators, Government officials at all levels, and even Government consultants use such disclosures to try to shift a policy, harm an enemy or help a friend. Only the most sensitive of such disclosures, those involving highly classified information, ever lead to F.B.I. investigations.

Congressional and Reagan Administration officials said the team was formed largely in reaction to criticism that inquiries were handled by agents who worked too slowly and lacked so-

phistication in complex national security issues. The bureau would not comment on those remarks.

The number of agents assigned to the inquiries has not changed over the last year, although F.B.I. officials said this was the first time in recent memory that they had been assembled on one team under a single supervisor.

W. Raymond Wannall, former assistant director of the bureau in charge of the intelligence division, said in an interview that a special team would lead to more effective investigations.

"I think there is an advantage to having a team with special training and a lot of savvy to handle situations like this," he said, noting that cases often involved detailed interviews of Cabinet-level officials.

Several White House officials and the Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, have long called for tougher action to punish those who disclose Government secrets.

Threats of Prosecution

Earlier this year, Mr. Casey threatened to prosecute The Washington Post, The New York Times and other news organizations that he asserted had disclosed American communications secrets. No prosecution was undertaken, however.

Last month Mr. Casey said the Administration was expanding its efforts to control unauthorized disclosures and would prosecute if needed.

"We are putting into place mechanisms to aggressively investigate apparent cases of leaking within the Government and to take punitive and legal action against Government employees who betray the trust placed in them,"

he said.

The decision to refer a case to the Justice Department for possible investigation is often made on a political basis. Sometimes disclosure of classified information is made or authorized by officials at the highest levels as a means of explaining or justifying Administration policy. Investigations by the Bureau ensue when the news media disclose information that one or more agencies did not want released.

While the Government has investigated hundreds of unauthorized disclosures over past decades, only one inquiry has led to a criminal conviction. In that case, a Navy analyst, Samuel Loring Morison, was convicted of espionage last year for providing a classified photograph to a magazine.

Inquiries in 2 Cases

The F.B.I. would not disclose what news reports had prompted recent investigations. But law-enforcement officials confirmed that agents were trying to find the source of articles by Seymour M. Hersh in The New York Times last summer about Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, the army commander of Panama, and his purported involvement in drug activities and the illicit concealment of the sources of money, assertions that the general denied.

A Government official knowledgeable about intelligence said another investigation involved an article in The Los Angeles Times earlier this year that described a secret Administration report on the Government's mishandling of the case of Edward Lee Howard, a former Central Intelligence Agency officer accused of espionage. The bureau and the Central Intelligence Agency were specifically assailed in the report for their handling of Mr. Howard, who escaped while under surveillance by F.B.I. agents.

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The bureau said the team, made of up two agents who specialize in counterintelligence and two from the criminal division, was part of a larger squad that handled cases of domestic terrorism, such as bombings.

The four agents currently spend most of their time investigating disclosures, officials said.

Bill Baker, the chief F.B.I. spokesman, said in an interview that the team was formed because the bureau wanted to consolidate and expedite such investigations and assure that they were handled by agents selected for their "maturity and experience."

Full Range of Tools

Bureau officials said the squad would be permitted to make use of a full range of investigative tools, including polygraphs, or lie detectors, and court-approved wiretaps.

Senior law-enforcement officials said they did not believe that the bureau was tapping the telephones of reporters, but the bureau would not rule out taps against reporters in highly sensitive investigations.

Jane Kirtley, a spokesman for the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, said she was not aware of the F.B.I. squad, but she said the committee was concerned about any Government effort that might curtail responsible reporting.

"We've always been troubled by attempts on the part of the Reagan Administration to stifle the free flow of information," she said. "We've always believed that exerting pressure on Government employees is a regrettable thing."

The F.B.I. noted that the new team was answerable only to its Director, William H. Webster, and the Justice Department. "By keeping it under Judge Webster, you retain all of the demands he makes on sensitive investigations," Mr. Baker said.